

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06
IO-13 TRSE-00 COME-00 EB-08 LAB-04 SIL-01 /087 W
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P R 031828Z MAR 78
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3796
INFO AMEMBASSY BONN
AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN
AMEMBASSY DUBLIN
AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE
AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG
AMEMBASSY OSLO
AMEMBASSY ROME
AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM
USMISSION USNATO
AMCONSUL BELFAST
AMCONSUL EDINBURGH

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 03548

E. O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK
SUBJECT: TORIES WIN ILFORD NORTH BY-ELECTION

SUMMARY - THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY, AS EXPECTED, REGAINED
THE ILFORD NORTH SEAT VACATED BY THE DEATH OF THE
INCUMBENT LABOR MP. THE ELECTION RESULTS REVEALED A
6.9 PERCENT SWING AGAINST LABOR. THE LOSS OF THIS
SEAT INCREASES THE GOVERNMENT'S CURRENT MINORITY
POSITION IN PARLIAMENT TO 25 SEATS, BUT DOES NOT
ELIMINATE ITS EFFECTIVE WORKING MAJORITY. THE LIBERALS
FINISHED A DISTANT THIRD, AS MUCH OF THEIR PREVIOUS
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SUPPORT VANISHED. THE NEO-FASCIST NATIONAL FRONT (NF)
FINISHED FOURTH, ONLY SLIGHTLY BEHIND THE LIBERALS.
THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE RAISED BY CONSERVATIVE LEADER
THATCHER DOMINATED THE BY-ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND WAS
EVIDENTLY AN IMPORTANT, BUT NOT DECISIVE, FACTOR IN
THE OUTCOME. END SUMMARY

1. CONSERVATIVE CANDIDATE VIVIAN BENDALL DEFEATED HIS LABOR OPPONENT IN THE MARCH 2 ILFORD NORTH BY-ELECTION BY A SUBSTANTIAL 5,500 VOTES, TAKING 50.4 PERCENT OF THE POLL. THE LABOR CANDIDATE WON ONLY 38 PERCENT. THE SWING TO THE TORIES WAS 6.9 PERCENT, COMPARED TO THE OCTOBER 1974 GENERAL ELECTION. ONLY SLIGHTLY LESS THAN THE AVERAGE FOR ALL BY-ELECTIONS DURING THE LIFE OF THIS PARLIAMENT. THE LIBERAL SHARE OF THE VOTE DROPPED FROM 16.6 PERCENT IN THE GENERAL ELECTION TO 5 PERCENT. THE NF RECEIVED 4.7 PERCENT, WHILE THE FORMER CONSERVATIVE MP WHO STOOD AS AN INDEPENDENT GAINED ONLY 1.5 PERCENT. THE TURN-OUT" 68.2 PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE, WAS SLIGHTLY HIGHER THAN EXPECTED, BUT WELL BELOW THE 75 PERCENT NORM FOR A GENERAL ELECTION.

2. THE RECAPTURE OF THIS SEAT WAS CLEARLY A GRATIFYING VICTORY OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY AND FOR MRS. THATCHER PERSONALLY. THE MARGIN OF VICTORY -- 12 PERCENT -- WAS ABOUT WHAT HAD BEEN INDICATED IN EARLY OPINION POLLS, BUT WELL SHORT OF THE 22 PERCENT MARGIN SUGGESTED IN A FEBRUARY 25/26 GALLUP POLL IN THE CONSTITUENCY. THE GOVERNMENT COULD FIND LITTLE COMFORT IN THE RESULTS, ESPECIALLY SINCE THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE DOMINATED THE CAMPAIGN AND WAS CLEARLY AN IMPORTANT ONE. IMMIGRATION AS A RESULT, WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY CONTINUE TO OCCUPY LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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AN IMPORTANT PLACE IN THE CONSERVATIVE ORDER OF PRIORITY ISSUES. WHILE THERE IS REASON TO BELIEVE THAT THE SALIENCY OF IMMIGRATION WILL LESSEN WITH TIME, THE ILFORD NORTH EXPERIENCE SEEMS TO STRENGTHEN MRS. THATCHER'S REPUTATION AS A POLITICAL TACTICIAN.

3. IN REVIEWING THE ELECTION RESULTS, WE DRAW THE FOLLOWING CONCLUSIONS:

-- THE TORY MARGIN TENDS TO CONFIRM THE RESULTS OF THE MOST RECENT NATIONAL GALLUP POLL WHICH SHOWED THAT THE CONSERVATIVES MOVED TO A 9-POINT LEAD OVER THE LABOR PARTY IN MID-FEBRUARY (THE TWO PARTIES WERE LOCKED IN A DEAD HEAT IN JANUARY).

-- THE OUTCOME SHARPLY DECREASES THE LIKELIHOOD THAT CALLAGHAN WILL OPT FOR A GENERAL ELECTION IN THE SPRING OF 1978.

-- THE COLLAPSE OF THE LIBERAL VOTE IS ANOTHER BLOW TO DAVID STEEL'S HOPE THAT HIS PARTY'S SUPPORT OF THE GOVERNMENT WILL ULTIMATELY ENHANCE ITS POPULAR STANDING. PRESSURE ON STEEL FOR AN EARLY TERMINATION OF THE LIBERAL PACT WITH THE GOVERNMENT WILL NO DOUBT INCREASE, BUT ARMED WITH THE AUTHORITY GIVEN HIM AT THE JANUARY

LIBERAL ASSEMBLY AND FACED WITH DECLINING ELECTORAL
SUPPORT, WE DO NOT BELIEVE STEEL IS LIKELY TO TAKE ANY
ACTION WHICH WOULD HASTEN A GENERAL ELECTION.
-- THE MAJORITY OF THE DEFECTING LIBERAL VOTERS -- MANY

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OF WHOM APPEAR TO HAVE SUPPORTED THE LIBERALS AS A
MENY OF PROTEST AGAINST THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES -- SEEMS
TO HAVE SWITCHED TO THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY. THIS TENDS
TO CONFIRM CONVENTIONAL WISDOM WHICH HOLDS THAT
DEFECTING LIBERAL VOTERS FAVOR THE TORIES BY ABOUT
A 2-TO-1 MAJORITY.
-- THE NF ALSO APPEARS TO HAVE RECEIVED SOME OF THE
FORMER LIBERAL VOTES -- WITH THE LIBERALS SUPPORTING
CALLAGHAN, THE NF BECAME THE MOST OBVIOUS ALTERNATIVE

TO THOSE WISHING TO EXPRESS THEIR DISAFFECTION WITH
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THE MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES. THE NF ALSO SEEMS TO
HAVE DRAWN MORE VOTERS AWAY FROM LABOR THAN FROM THE
TORIES, AS HAD BEEN ANTICIPATED. AND THERE CAN BE NO
DOUBT THAT THE NF ATTRACTED THE HARD-CORE RACIST VOTE.
THE RESULTS SUGGEST THAT FEW VOTERS REGARD RACE AS AN
OVERRIDING ISSUE IN AN ELECTION, BUT SMALL NUMBERS
COULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN A CLOSE CONTEST BETWEEN THE
TWO MAJOR PARTIES, WITH THE CONSERVATIVES THE PRINCIPAL
BENEFICIARIES.

-- THE POOR FINISH OF THE FORMER CONSERVATIVE MP
STANDING AS AN INDEPENDENT (HE RECEIVED 671 VOTES)
SEEMS TO CONFIRM THE RULE THAT IN BRITISH ELECTIONS
AN INDIVIDUAL RARELY MAKES A DIFFERENCE OF MORE THAN A
THOUSAND VOTES.

4. THESE CONCLUSIONS, HOWEVER, SHOULD BE ACCOMPANIED
BY THE CAVEAT THAT THE RESULTS OF A GENERAL ELECTION
CANNOT BE RELIABLY EXTRAPOLATED FROM BY-ELECTIONS.
ALTHOUGH THE ILFORD NORTH CONSTITUENCY IS MORE REPRESENTATIVE
THAN MOST OTHERS. FACTORS SUCH AS THE VOLATILITY OF THE
BRITISH ELECTORATE, THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LOCALIZED AND
NATIONAL CAMPAIGNS AND CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES AND ISSUES
MAKE PROJECTION OF BY-ELECTION RESULTS EXTREMELY DUBIOUS.
ILFORD NORTH, NEVERTHELESS, WAS A SIGNIFICANT AND PARTICULARLY
INSTRUCTIVE BY-ELECTION.

BREWSTER

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